

# THE MASTER KEY

By JOHN FLEMING WILSON



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A Novelized Version of the Motion Picture Drama of the Same Name Produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. Illustrated With Photographs From the Picture Production.

## CHAPTER VII.

### Wilkerson the Plotter.

Wilkerson had thoroughly learned his lesson. He was coolly, in spite of the letter he had received from Jean Darnell in New York, telling him of her willingness to finance her scheme, determined he must be friends with John Dorr, at least outwardly. So he smoothed out the visible wrinkles in his face, trying to veil the malicious gleam in his eyes, and spent two days quietly trying to show his amiability, not only to the miners, but to Dorr himself.

Wilkerson was absolutely certain that his old partner, Thomas Gallon, had really made a rich find and that he had lost the location and accepted "The Master Key" as a substitute in the hope that by working it thoroughly he might find the mother lode. In other words, careful manipulation of

to go a couple of hundred feet."

Wilkerson looked at him shrewdly. "That will cost money," he remarked. "But I'll take this up with Ruth."

John looked at him with a faint trace of the old enmity in his eyes. He did not like to hear the first name of the mistress of "The Master Key" on those lips.

"If the mine is not paying it's up to us to make it pay," he remarked.

When Wilkerson entered the bungalow Ruth perceived a great change in his attitude. He was no longer sullen, and he was evidently worried. It was a clean worry, and she smiled at him. Had not her father come in with that expression on his face many times? She put her chin in the cup of her hands and asked cheerfully, "What is it, Mr. Wilkerson?"

"May I sit down?" he said awkwardly. She motioned to a chair, and he pulled out of his pocket a paper covered with figures.

"I think you ought to know how things are going along, Miss Gallon," he said, with unusual formality. "When your father made me superintendent of this mine I did not realize that the responsibility was so heavy as it is. We are not making any money. We are losing money. You can see by the reports which I have here that our cleanup lately has been far less than our expenses, and our last one showed practically nothing. We must find the vein again. To do so we must have money. There is no money in 'The Master Key' mine."

"That's what father used to say sometimes," said Ruth quietly. "But he always got it."

Wilkerson flushed. "Miss Gallon, I hope that you don't think that I'm not doing my best. I am. John Dorr and I have gone over this matter together. He agrees with me that we have absolutely lost the vein and that if 'The Master Key' is to pay anything more we must find it again."

Ruth's expression softened at the mention of John Dorr's name. "What does he think?" she demanded. "What is the chance of finding it again?"

"If we run west, Dorr thinks," said Wilkerson slowly, "we'll recover the vein, but that will cost money, which we haven't got. Do you realize, Miss Gallon, that the pay roll here is over \$1,000 a day? Within a week I have to pay out over \$30,000 for the month, and I tell you frankly that when I have paid that there will be no more money to the account of 'The Master Key' in the bank in Silent Valley."

Ruth realized that he was speaking the truth, even lessening the immediateness of the catastrophe, but her distaste of the man was too great to allow her to discuss the matter with him in the intimate way which she felt was necessary. She must see John Dorr.

She quickly dismissed Wilkerson and then went to Dorr's office herself, meeting him at the door. She bore as a gift a small basket of fruit. Without preliminaries she said, "John, are we broke?"

He laughed; then his face grew grave. "The mine is not paying," he said briefly.

"But can't we make it pay? What is the matter?"

"Money," said John.

"But why money?"

"It will cost \$10,000 to drive that new tunnel," John added as they entered the office.

"But Mr. Wilkerson just said he was going to pay over \$30,000 to the men," Ruth said soberly. "If we have that much money, why can't we?"

A tenderness flooded Dorr's eyes. He comprehended her helplessness, understood why old Thomas Gallon had been so insistent that he, John Dorr, should look after her. She was a mere child. He tried to explain the exact situation with the result that Ruth finally pushed him off his high stool, got up on it herself and wrote in a large, childish hand right across the face of one of his new drawings, "I must raise \$10,000!"

She swung around to John and asked, "How can I get \$10,000?"

Dorr hesitated. His plan was risky

in view of Wilkerson's attitude, but, after all, the money must be raised. He said quietly: "Pledge the stock you own in 'The Master Key.' I know a man in New York who will loan you \$10,000 on it." He bent over her earnestly. "But listen, Ruth. If we spend the \$10,000 and we don't find the mother lode, you lose the mine. It's just like a mortgage on a farm."

"But you wouldn't suggest this if it weren't the only way out," she said briefly. "Now, how am I to do this?"

"You must go to New York and see George Everett. I will give you a letter to him, and he will see to it that you get the extra money we need. Meanwhile I'll keep the mine going."

Ruth gave him her full eyes. "You don't like Mr. Wilkerson, do you?"

"I don't trust him," he replied.

At this moment the superintendent entered the office and, seeing their two heads close together over the desk, he scowled.

"I came to see what we are going to do about that new tunnel," he said roughly. "I don't like to start in anything I can't finish."

Ruth swung around to say quietly: "I am going to New York city to see Mr. George Everett, a friend of Mr. Dorr's, and I will come back with the \$10,000."

"Everett, Everett"—repeated Wilkerson, "who is George Everett?"

Despite John's frowns, Ruth volubly explained. When she had finished



"John, are we broke?"

Wilkerson nodded and said: "I'll put the men to work tomorrow, Dorr. Better have your plans ready!" He stamped out.

"You had better go this afternoon," John told Ruth. "There is no time to lose."

"All right," she said, "I'll be ready in an hour."

John smiled. "All right; I'll take you over in the motor truck or shall we ride to Silent Valley?"

"I've never been to New York," she said timidly, and with that inconsequential logic which maidens have, she added, "Let's ride. I'll take Patsy and you can ride Black Joe."

Dorr did not understand at all that in leaving her home for the great strange city she wished her last hours to be filled with sunshine and a familiar rest of scurrying over dry California on half broken horseflesh.

"All right, we'll ride," he said. "While you are getting ready I'll write a letter to George Everett."

Ruth laid one slender hand on John's shoulder.

"You're always doing things for me, John," she said simply. "Some day I'll do something for you." She slipped away without a backward glance.

Dorr watched her trip down the hill toward her own little bungalow, and it seemed to him as if he held one end of a golden thread that she was spinning through sunshine. It was anchored in his heart. That thread would be 3,000 miles long before she saw good old Everett. He picked up his pen and wrote rapidly:

"Master Key" Mine, June — George Everett, 111 Broadway, New York City:

Dear George—When a young, slender, brown-eyed, golden-haired girl walks into your office and says, "I'm Ruth Gallon," and hands you the papers that she will have in her little hand bag, please see that she gets \$10,000. Ever yours,

JOHN DORR.

He would have added more. His finer instinct told him that Ruth should be the first to put the whole scheme before the cool-headed, rather cold-hearted George Everett. He addressed the envelope and sealed it. Then he went to the telephone and called up the station at Silent Valley.

"Bill," he said quietly after listening a moment to see if any one was on the line, "I want to send a telegram. Take it over the wire, please. I'll be down in a little while and pay you."

"Sure," floated back a cheerful voice. "I wish my credit was as good as yours, ten miles away, but it seems as if I have to be always present when I ask for it. Go ahead, John!"

"This is it, Bill," said John:

George Everett, 111 Broadway, New York City:

Miss Ruth Gallon leaves tonight to see you about "Master Key" stock. Meet her and wire me on her arrival. Take good care of her or I'll take care of you.

JOHN DORR.

The operator repeated the message and involuntarily adopted a little of John's savage intonation on the last four words. It woke him up to the fact that he was allowing his feelings to become public. He began to see why it was that men looked at him strangely at times, when it was a question of Ruth's interests. He must restrain himself.

The operator did not hang up immediately, but said hesitatingly: "Say, John, there's a wire here; just came in from 'The Master Key' mine. It does not seem to jibe with yours. Wilkerson sent it."

"I'll play fair," said John to himself, and he called back over the wire, "Bill, that's yours and Wilkerson's business, not mine." If he had listened to the tenor of the message directed to Jean Darnell, in New York, he would have learned what Wilkerson was plotting.

For years Wilkerson had built up for himself a golden image in Jean Darnell. No one realized better than himself that she was a creature of appetite, a lover of silk and velvet. A woman whose eyes widened at sight of a Persian cat. Feminine in every degree, womanly in none. But he himself, dominated absolutely, utterly and completely by his desires, had fallen under her spell, and he was going to win her, no matter how. It is a strange thing that when a dishonest man finally yields to an honest passion nothing will satisfy him but the utmost observance of the ritual of society. Harry Wilkerson's vision was of walking up the aisle of a great church to meet his bride at the altar.

Yet he had always thought of her in terms of gold; that was a contrast—the pallid, satiny, blue-eyed woman, voluptuous, soft—and his image of her built of yellow gold, dragged out of the bowels of "The Master Key" mine.

This image was now before his eyes: Instead of the warm, sun-blessed California hills, with their faint scent of sage and cactus, he saw a richly furnished room and breathed the odor of attar of roses. Let us not follow him in his dreams. But looking over his shoulder an hour later we read:

"Master Key" Mine, June — Jean Darnell, Astor House, New York City:

Find George Everett at 111 Broadway and meet Ruth Gallon in Chicago on Santa Fe express leaving here this evening. Introduce Drake as Everett after you have seen Everett and keep the girl to yourself until I can arrange matters.

HARRY.

"I can't send this through any office near here," he thought, "so I guess I'll ride down to Valle Vista and hand it to the conductor. He can send it from Los Angeles."

Three days later Ruth Gallon settled herself in the seat of a Pullman that was soon to leave Chicago for New York. She was excited. In crossing town from one depot to another she had heard sounds that had never met her ears before—the sounds of the world's business which, oddly enough, seemed to be mostly hauled over cobbles. The faint echo of that noise still rang in her ears. It appealed her to think that she must dwell with men who lived in such an atmosphere; also she felt very lonely. She thought of the mine, of Tom Kane in the door of his cook shanty, of the great ore bucket swinging across the gulch toward the mill, of John, bending over his blue prints and papers; of the grave on the hill where her father lay, still within the precincts of "The Master Key."

It had been so impressed upon her that her mission was of vital importance to the mine, that these tender emotions flowed into the same channel. She pulled the key, warm from her bosom, out of its hiding place and looked at it.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### Jean Darnell's Race.

"THIS must be Miss Gallon," said a pleasant voice.

Ruth looked up to see a woman of florid beauty and dressed in somewhat extravagant style looking down at her out of great, tawny, velvet eyes. Western bred, Ruth responded amiably to this salutation, though she had not the faintest idea who the woman was.

"Yes, I am Miss Gallon."

"I am Mrs. Darnell," said the woman. "May I sit down? I am an old friend of your friend, John Dorr's. He wired me that I would find you on this train." The lie was so plausible that Ruth merely blushed, thinking that it was one more token of John Dorr's

carefulness of her comfort and safety. To her inexperienced eyes this woman represented the tremendous city to which she was going. Her dress, her manner, her jewels, the evasive perfume that she affected were all strange and impressive to her. She moved over a little to allow Mrs. Darnell to sit down.

"John never spoke of you," said Ruth simply. "I did not have the faintest notion that I was to meet any of his friends. Do you live in New York?"

"Yes, I live in New York. I happened to be in Chicago, and through Mr. Everett I heard from John."

"Oh, you know Mr. Everett?" cried Ruth. "He is the man I am going to see in New York," and she went on to tell, as best she could, the gist of her mission.

It was typical of the woman to whom she was talking that she did not interrupt this naïve narrative. She sat in sullen silence, occasionally allowing her great eyes to rest on Ruth's fair face with an assumption of affection. As a matter of fact, she was profoundly interested. Life had taught Jean Darnell a great many things, and among them had been the great lesson of self preservation—the saving for herself of money, of comfort, of health and of good looks. Now it was a question of money, prime among them all, and her rather keen wits saw precisely the chances which Wilkerson was taking. She recalled his oft repeated statements that there was money in "The Master Key" and his latest letters imploring her to help him get control of the stock.

When Ruth ended up with a gentle "And so I told John I'd come and see what I could do," the elder woman smiled gently. Times were not so good with her as they had been, and if Harry Wilkerson could put this deal through and make money for them all it would simplify many a problem which she dully pondered at night.

"Mr. Everett will meet us at the train," she said briefly, "and then you can tell him all this. Meanwhile, suppose we talk about something else."

"But I can't think of anything else," said Ruth.

"Oh, you will," said Mrs. Darnell. "You can combine the pleasure of seeing New York with your little business. Mr. Everett will quickly settle that part of it, and I shall take great pleasure in showing you about Manhattan. I presume you are fond of opera?"

"I have never been to the opera," Ruth responded. "I should love to go, but when I do I must go all alone," she went on impulsively. "I think opera must be like church—one wants to go all by oneself."

Mrs. Darnell turned very slowly and for the first time in many years revealed a secret thought: "Do you know that my only pleasant memories, my dear are of myself?"

The bitterness of that confession, with all its implication, wholly escaped Ruth's sensitive but inexperienced mind. Yet there was something in the tone that warmed her heart to this effulgent creature. At least, she was not going into the great city all alone, nor confront Mr. Everett by herself. Mrs. Darnell made her feel that she was competently protected.

When they arrived the next morning at the Grand Central station in New York city Mrs. Darnell quietly introduced her to a slim, rather handsome young man, who seemed ill at ease until he had drawn Ruth's companion aside for a moment for a chat while the porter collected their luggage.

"I don't just like this game," he said. "In the first place, Everett is a big man in the city, and this Miss Gallon doesn't look to me like a girl you could fool long. Anyway, I can't understand what you are trying to do, Jean. You must know what sort of a fellow Harry Wilkerson is by this time. Why play his hand for him?"

"I don't notice you holding any trumps in your hand," she returned gently, but with a faint gleam in her eyes which made him draw back.

"This is my game, and I expect you to play your part. You come on now and be George Everett. The girl is as ignorant as a pigeon. Remember what I told you."

"About that stock?" he said sullenly.

"Yes, the stock. You understand that she came to New York simply to raise money for this mine. You are supposed to handle the business for her. If you don't learn all that is to be learned about 'The Master Key' mine in the next two days you are more than the fool I take you for."

She drew him back to where Ruth stood amid the suit cases and hand bags and said, "Miss Gallon, Mr. Everett has been telling me that he, too, has heard from John Dorr about your coming."

Ruth scanned him politely. But the interest died in her eyes when she saw what sort of a man he was. He might be a friend of John's; he might be the man to rescue "The Master Key" from bankruptcy, but he did not interest her.

Drake, trying to play the part of the busy broker and, being thoroughly and temperamentally an actor, felt the chill of this lack of interest and would certainly have fallen down on his part had not been prompted by Mrs. Darnell. He was glad to hasten away to find the elusive taxi.

The real George Everett got out of his limousine on the corner of Vanderbilt avenue and hurried through the revolving doors; brisk, debonair, alert, decided; with that happy style which denies foppishness and avoids surveillance. It seemed strange that he should have a photograph in his hand at which he looked intently until he got in the concourse. There he stopped and, with the picture still in his hand, commenced watching the faces of the people thronging through the gates under the

vast dome. As he waited he frowned slightly. "Why had John Dorr sent him during business hours on a wild goose chase?" He thought of this articulately and then smiled to himself. "A wild goose?" he muttered. It brought up darkling sunset vistas, lakes smooth as quicksilver under the evening sky, and slim, gray, beautiful birds homing downward. The frown left his forehead.

"After all it will be good to see somebody from out of doors," he said to himself.

Half an hour later he discovered that he had irretrievably missed the arrival of the Chicago express and with it Ruth Gallon. He went back into his car and drove to his office. Once there he called his head clerk, an ancient and fragile man, his crisp and bloodless as the money that passes on Wall street, and told him to see at what hotel Miss Ruth Gallon was stopping. Then he wired John Dorr:

111 Broadway, New York.

John Dorr, "Master Key" Mine, Silent Valley, Cal.:

Could not find Miss Gallon at train. Am seeking for her, as it is important that the business be settled immediately. Wire any possible address.

GEORGE EVERETT.

Far out on Broadway, above the eighties, an operator was ticking off another message addressed to Harry Wilkerson. It read:

25 A West Eighty-fourth St., New York.

Harry Wilkerson, "Master Key" Mine, via Valle Vista, Cal.:

Everything all right. George met Ruth. She is now with me and waiting further particulars. Have seen Everett under guise of prospective purchaser of stock. The girl is charming.

JEAN DARNELL.

Some houses, like some people, should never be illumined with sunshine, and Mrs. Darnell's residence, overlooking the Hudson, was of this type. Its dull, red stone front, marked by windows that seemed blind to all that went by, was not distinctive in that neighborhood. A thousand doors within a mile would have suggested to the passerby nothing more nor less than the great oak portals within which she lived. To Ruth Gallon, of course, the house seemed tremendously formal and stately. Within she found an atmosphere so absolutely strange and alien to all she had ever known that she shrank within herself and had nothing to say until she had been conducted to her own room on the third floor and a discreet maid was busy unpacking her things. Ruth felt that society had already laid its restrictions on her. She recognized the maid as the "gown and hat" policeman.

This silent, but exceedingly obtrusive personage having retired at last, Ruth studied her surroundings. When she had completed her survey she thought to herself that there were two things wanting. One was a silk-haired Persian cat and the other a flaming colored scarf across the bed that completed the altogether of an apartment severely luxurious. Then she tried to analyze the odor, delicate yet insistent, which she was ever afterward to associate with Jean Darnell and her experience in New York.

At last she traced it to some pallid flowers in the great green and dark red vase, whose unwholesome beauty was that of plants whose roots have never been in good, sound soil. They looked to her much like lilies, whose pads had floated on some dark and opalescent pool, viscid with odors of the night. She was still staring at these and sniffing their scent through widened nostrils when Mrs. Darnell knocked on the door and entered slowly. She had changed her street gown for a negligee, which instantly caught the girl's appreciative eye.

"You look beautiful," she said quickly. Jean Darnell turned her tawny eyes on her and smiled faintly.

"I am not usually up until noon," she responded, "and—I am getting old, my dear." She threw out her jeweled hands with a sparkling gesture of half comic resignation. Ruth laughed.

"John Dorr says everybody gets old in New York. Don't you like him?"

Mrs. Darnell looked into the clear eyes of the girl and almost failed to follow her baser instinct. But at that loose throat she saw the heavy gold of "The Master Key." As if it had supernatural powers, the sight of that key locked the door of her heart. "Of course I like John," she said easily.

"We must get everything fixed up now. George will be here—George Everett, of course. I mean—tonight, and you and he can talk the business over."

"You know, we simply must have the money," Ruth returned earnestly. "The mine isn't paying now, but John knows where we can find the mother lode again; then we'll be rich."

"Ah," said Jean Darnell. "You're selling stock, I presume?"

"I own it all," Ruth returned proudly. "It's my mine. My father left it to me when he died." She did not see the sullen hatred that slowly flamed until Jean Darnell's eyes fairly blazed.

In her own room she stood a moment breathless. Then she tore off her flimsy negligee in an intensity of silent rage and despair, seen only by the unextinguished eyes of the god whom she had defied.

It is wickedness, not virtue, which is theatrical, and at this moment Jean Darnell flung herself into her evil passion with all the abandon of the tragedian, only her voice was almost inaudible: "Tom Gallon, Tom Gallon, dead though you are, I'll have revenge!" When her fury had spent itself—and, like all physically indolent women, she could not yield long to emotion—she prepared her campaign.

First she called up George Drake and made certain that he would be at her home for dinner that evening. Then she called up two old acquaintances who were always glad to fill empty spaces at her well set table. This set

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